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Many obstacles to US intelligence gathering in Soviet Union

Conspicuous Americans are closely watched; then there are double-agents

Washington

The day after the United States announced a mass expulsion of Soviet diplomats accused of espionage, the Soviet news agency Tass spat out a bitter epitaph.

Adolf Tolkachev, one of the Soviet Union's leading aeronautical engineers, had been executed, Tass said, for "spying . . . as an agent of US intelligence."

The dispatch underlined one likely reason that the Reagan administration decided on a mass expulsion of Soviet spies now. It could be that the Soviets cannot hit back hard in Moscow, because the US has few intelligence assets left to lose in the Soviet capital.

Edward Lee Howard, a disgruntled former CIA employee who defected to Moscow, has helped the KGB to devastate American intelligence-gathering efforts in Moscow and Leningrad. Mr. Howard is believed to have provided information that not only allowed the KGB to identify Mr. Tolkachev and other Soviet collaborators, but also a number of US intelligence agents operating under diplomatic cover.

Howard is also thought to have identified some of the "dead drops" where US agents left messages, and to have exposed some of the elaborate methods they used to communicate with one another. Tolkachev, according to some accounts, was responding to a spurious summons from his US Embassy contact, and instead found a KGB agent waiting for him at the rendezvous point.

Is the US now going for broke with the mass expulsions, because its own intelligence effort in Moscow is in tatters? "We don't have any comment on that," a US official says.

In fact, intelligence gathering in Moscow is surprisingly hard, even without the risk of exposure by double-agents. The Russian language is difficult to master, and few Americans manage to speak it without an accident. Diplomatic cars have special red-and-white license plates that make them easy to spot.

Nor can an agent easily blend into the cityscape by hopping in a cab or riding the subway. Because the US Embassy and the compounds where diplomats live are guarded around the clock, tailing is fairly easy, and the KGB is well schooled in the art.

Sometimes it uses more sophisticated methods. Last year the American Embassy protested when the KGB applied a special tracing chemical, NPPD, to surfaces likely to be touched by American diplomats.

The American Embassy has, in the past, eavesdropped on conversations between the Kremlin and mobile phones in limousines used by high party officials, prompting the Soviets to scramble the signals. Also, the KGB has at times bombarded the communications-intercept antennas on the top of the embassy with radio waves in order to disrupt the eavesdropping.

When the KGB is particularly miffed, American diplomats in Moscow, even those with no apparent connection to intelligence-gathering operations, soon find their tires slashed or their cars vandalized.

America's spies in the Soviet capital will doubtless be particularly cautious in the weeks and months ahead, to avoid the fate of their Soviet counterparts who have been sent packing.

— Gary Thatcher

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